

**BRING
IT**

SEELEY JAMES

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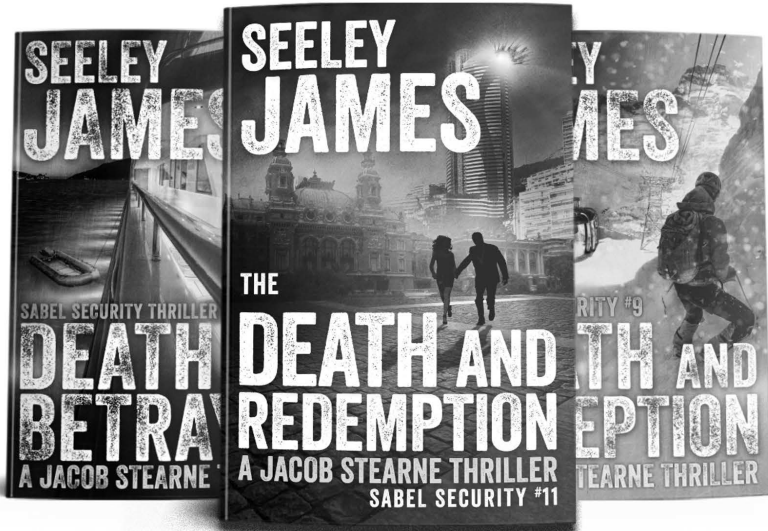
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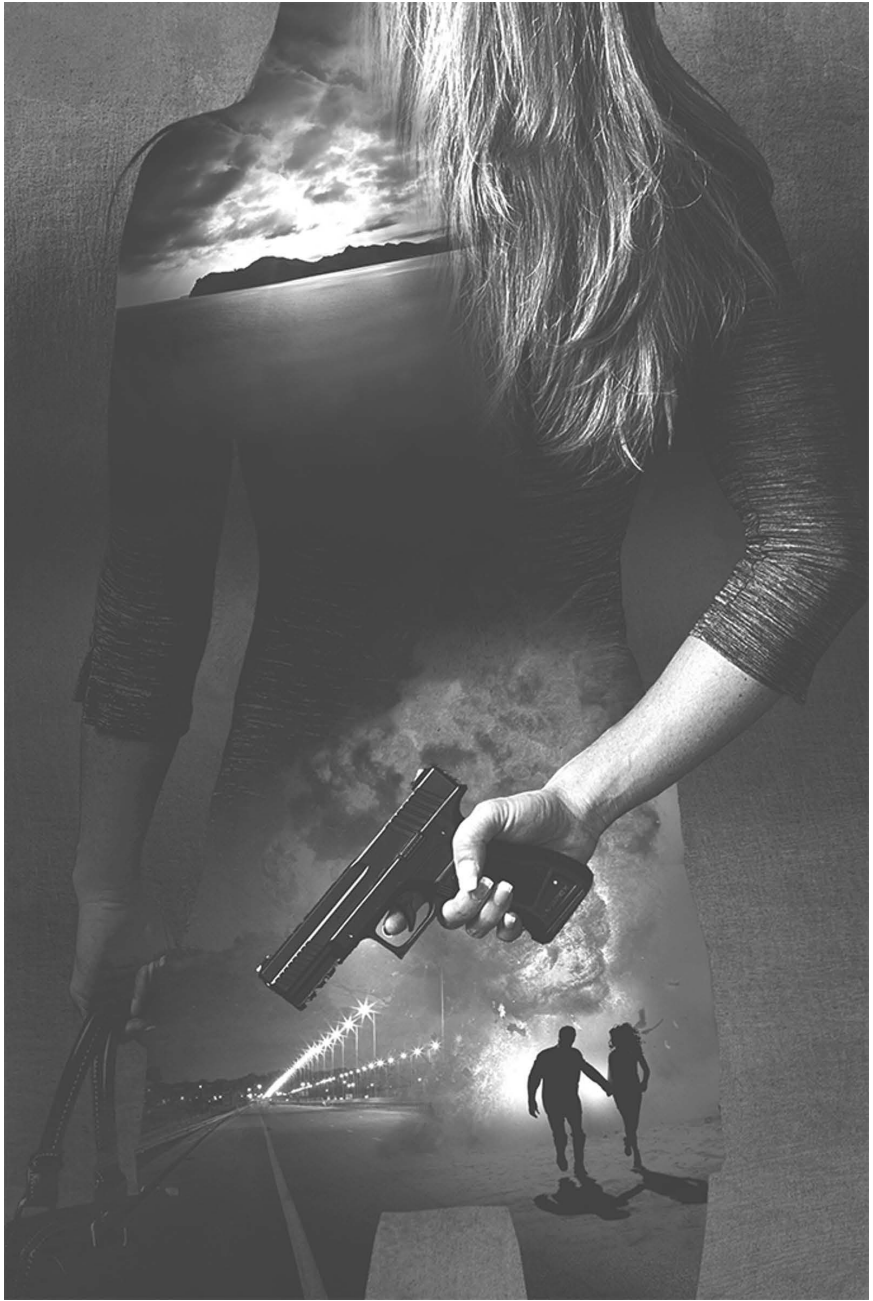
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For Amelia & Chris

CHAPTER 1

PIA SABEL TRAILED FIVE YARDS behind Agent Marty, her head of security, as sunlight stabbed between the leaves overhead and the oppressive weight of Washington's summer pressed in. For the last three days, everything in her life had focused on those who hurled the javelins of power and those impaled on their spikes. In her twenty-five years, she'd grown accustomed to winning, from Buenos Aires to London to Beijing, and had long ago lost patience with anyone or anything that distracted her from her goal. Yet she was walking toward just such a distraction.

Agent Tania followed two yards behind. "You think they're really going to press charges?"

Pia glanced over her shoulder. "They can't. The State Department doesn't have the authority, or the evidence, or any enforcement charter."

"Then what the hell does State do?"

"Make sure US corporations get foreign contracts, make sure our spies have somewhere to hide, and make sure US travelers stay out of trouble."

"Foreign contracts? Is that how we won the Algerian deal?"

"The Secretary helped us land that one. That's the only reason I'm taking this ridiculous meeting."

They walked up the slight incline in silence. Marty reached the corner, checked both ways and made a hand signal, all clear, and disappeared to the right.

"But the letter said something about crimes against humanity," Tania said.

"You were there; you know we did the right thing."

"What you rich, white girls don't understand is guilty and innocent

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don't mean shit in court.”

“You and Marty have Sabel Security lawyers at your disposal. But you won't need them, it's a bluff.”

“Why do you care about that boy anyway?”

Pia turned around with a withering glare, bit her lip to stop herself from saying anything angry, and turned back.

“OK, sorry,” Tania said. “I'm no psychologist but even I know this obsession with Mullaitivu is beyond your tortured-childhood thing.”

Pia turned the corner. Ahead of her, Marty's head swiveled right and left, up and down, taking in every window and door in the forsaken neighborhood.

A bright glare reflected off a car's windshield, spearing her eyes. It took her back to that night and the blinding flash. The boy's eyes pleaded for help. He was inches from her outstretched hand when the tall Arab snatched him away. Bullets strafed the ground between them, denying her forward path. Then Tania blew up the gas tank on the resort's bus, the blinding flash, and the ensuing chaos changed everything. Her chance evaporated, the bad guys got away, and here she was, back in DC, waiting to hear some load of crap from a bureaucrat.

“OK, change of subject then.” Tania turned the corner and hustled to keep pace with Pia's long strides. “Why'd we leave the limo way back there and walk five blocks? It's hotter'n hell today.”

Pia kept walking.

“This would be a good time for one of your annoying little positive thinking speeches,” Tania said. “Something like, ‘heat is a state of mind,’ or, ‘people pay for this at the spa’. You got any pearls like that?”

Positive thinking was just what she needed. The Assistant Secretary of State, Donald Patterson, demanded she meet him in Carver Langston. The Major advised her to make a friend, not an enemy, of the man. Looking at the positive side, the State Department could be a powerful ally. But the tone of Patterson's email was far from positive. He riddled it with threats. And Pia never made friends with people who use threats.

Ten yards ahead of her, Marty picked a path through small wire tables scattered on the sidewalk and ducked inside a café. The scent of frying food covered the sidewalk like a layer of grease. In three seconds he

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popped back out and gave her a barely perceptible nod toward a table with two chairs near the curb. He took a seat near the café's door, his back to the brickwork.

Pia scraped back her assigned chair, positioned it facing the street, exactly opposite the table's other chair, and sat. They were uncomfortable chairs meant to keep patrons from overstaying their welcome. Indicative of the neighborhood as a whole.

Tania yanked a chair from the next table over, clattered it down next to Pia, and plopped in sideways, also facing the street. Tania's curly black hair sparkled as she shook it in the sunlight. Her dark skin was custom-made for late summer and contrasted well against her yellow polo shirt. With a quick scan, Tania measured the buildings, windows, and rooftops. She glanced over her shoulder. "Think they have a waiter?"

"You're not sitting with me."

"The hell I'm not. I dragged your ass off the bottom of the Atlantic. I sit where I want." Tania leaned back and laughed. "Besides, everyone knows you're in a mood. The Major told me to make sure you don't shoot anybody."

Not worth the argument.

Marty said, "Shooting someone might be necessary in this part of town. Three times the murder rate of the rest of the city. I'll say it again: *I don't like it.* Picking this hood is totally off for a government official, especially an O-6."

"I'm sure he has a reason," Pia said.

Pia took another look around. Air conditioners hung onto windowsills for dear life. Bad wiring looped from rooftops to telephone poles. Satellite dishes leaned out of the occasional window. Toys, worn and faded and broken, lay scattered in small, gritty yards. Across the street, the whole block had been converted to small businesses: a dry cleaner's that advertised self-serve washing machines, a dollar store that looked overpriced, a pawnshop armored with heavy steel bars, and a liquor store with a Bud Light sign that flickered behind dark glass. Powerball was up to forty-eight million. Two men in trench coats talked in the liquor store's doorway.

Pia pulled out her phone and called her assistant. "Send my

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maintenance crew down here, and have them clean up a four-block radius. And bring some toys too. First thing in the morning. Yes, keep it anonymous.”

Pia clicked off.

Tania said, “Why do everything anonymously?”

“Don’t want to ruin my reputation.”

A skinny guy with a scrawny goatee, wearing black pants and a white apron popped out the café door and smiled. Before he could say a word, Pia ordered three diet sodas.

She guessed the men at the liquor store were Mediterranean, originating somewhere between Israel and Greece: Crete, Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus. Albania, maybe? No way to narrow it down without getting a better look, but they were definitely out of place for the neighborhood.

“You going to marry Mark?” Tania asked. “He’s a hottie.”

“Shh. I need to focus.”

“Just stating the facts.” Tania settled back in her chair to keep watch.

Pia was in no mood for Tania’s small talk. All she could think about was that one boy, out of all the others, his eyes wouldn’t leave her alone.

The men in trench coats caught Pia’s eye again. They were talking to someone inside, and not nicely either. She could tell by the way the backs of their heads moved—up and back while talking, down and forward afterward. It was contemptuous body language: exposing the throat as an invitation for the other party to strike—*Go ahead, take a shot*—and then lowering the chin when finished as a sign of domination—*Couldn’t do it, could ya?* The men were using hand gestures too, but their hands disappeared from the sunlight into the inky blackness of the liquor store. After a last vehement gesture by the guy in the gray trench coat, they turned and walked down the sidewalk. Their faces pinched in hard, red anger.

Pia’s mind rolled back to Patterson and the power he wielded. Was he acting like the men in trench coats across the street, rearing his head back, testing her resolve? Logically, she should give in. Do whatever he asked. Let him win, then move on. Even her father had said so. But she didn’t like it. In the twenty years she’d spent playing soccer around the

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world, giving up was never an option.

Patterson could help her if she could get him to understand the problem.

“What’s the plan then?” Tania asked.

Pia sighed. “I don’t have one. I don’t even know what they want.”

“Well, why’re you watching those guys over there instead of thinking one up? You’re good at thinking up plans.”

“Then let me think.”

“Don’t worry about the guys across the street. Marty and I are tracking them. They’re not a threat to us, but if that changes, we’ll handle it.”

“I know, but I might take them down just for practice,” Pia said.

Tania crossed her arms and looked away.

When Pia couldn’t solve a problem by thinking about it, she could usually solve a problem by not. She refocused her attention on the men across the street, a good mental distraction.

The trench coats went into the pawnshop. Loud voices greeted them. Hailed as if they were friends returned from a journey. This time they didn’t stand in the doorway. They were sucked inside with a hearty welcome. The door closed.

The waiter came out carrying a tray with three Styrofoam cups. He set them down, one at a time, in front of Pia. As he moved the third and final cup from the tray to the table, she looked at him until his eyes met hers. The waiter hesitated, half-stooped over, glanced at Tania, then over his shoulder at Marty. The cup in his hand moved directly to Tania. He pulled two straws out of his apron and tossed them on the table. Pia thanked him. He nodded, picked up the third cup, and delivered it to Marty with a straw. Then he disappeared.

A few minutes later, the trench coats left the pawnshop. A fat man followed them outside. They stood on the sidewalk chatting and laughing for a few minutes. As they talked, the fat man nodded several times with his head bowed, then looked up and spoke. The trench coats liked what the fat man said and extended their hands for a shake. The fat man spread his hands wide, smiled, grabbed the gray trench coat’s hand, and pulled him into a half hug and added a back pat. He repeated the familiar

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gesture for the man in the dark trench coat. The threesome parted. The men in trench coats turned and walked toward the dollar store, and the fat man went back to his pawnshop.

They infuriated Pia.

Tania stood suddenly. "There he is. Only suit on the street. Gotta be him, right?"

A block away, a man in a suit stood at a shop window, checking his reflection. He looked official and out of place and had government shoes. He appeared satisfied with his reflection and resumed his march up the sidewalk toward them. Pia noticed he kept his pace controlled, his steps precise, and his gaze leveled at her.

"You ever see him before?" Tania asked.

"No."

"But that's him, right? Looks like a navy guy, walks like a navy guy—gotta be a navy guy. So, you think he's going to arrest us?"

CHAPTER 2

DONALD F. PATTERSON, ASSISTANT SECRETARY of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, exited the Stadium-Armory Metro stop at Nineteenth Street SE. He marched up the sidewalk with the same pride he had once felt on his destroyer's bridge. His mission reminded him of looking down the Strait of Hormuz to see the might of the United States Navy stretched out behind him. Destroyer after destroyer, sailing in tight formation, sending a clear message to Iran: *we dictate policy in these waters*. He was about to dictate policy again.

He took off his jacket, hooked it over his shoulder on a finger, and kept moving.

It was Patterson's good fortune to get the assignment. His boss had told him to report to the Under Secretary for Civilian Security and Human Rights for a special assignment, and there it was, like a gift: bring in Pia Sabel.

Something that should have been done years ago.

Rich kids are the scourge of any democracy. They never serve in the military, never work their way through college, never struggle in life. Yet they throw their money around in politics and causes, and people trip over themselves to lap up every dollar.

Pia Sabel's philanthropy may have endeared her to the masses long before she brought home a World Cup and Olympic gold, but Patterson knew her real story. It was high time someone brought her to justice. She'd had far too many privileges granted, too many sins forgiven. Someone had to make the arrogant young woman understand the consequences of her actions. She was not above the law—no matter how much money she had. No one can run amok in a third-world country, upend American operations, and walk away.

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She had to be stopped.

And Donald F. Patterson was the right man to stop her.

Patterson had scripted his plan. He'd given it careful consideration, thought through Pia's possible responses, dreamed up her potential flanking maneuvers, and crafted solutions for those contingencies. He had this meeting covered from every conceivable angle. Just for practice, he ran through the script in his head and decided that it was perfect. When he was done, she'd never mention Snare Drum again. He nearly shivered with excitement despite the late summer heat.

Patterson made a crisp crossing at the intersection and continued marching north, toward C Street. According to his calculations, it was just under a mile to his destination—fifteen minutes from the Stadium-Armory Metro stop to the meeting. Altogether, he would be nine minutes late: late enough to signal his importance but not enough for her to cancel. Timing designed to make her understand who was in charge of this meeting.

He stopped at the light on Benning Road. There were no cars in sight. He waited. Two blocks to go. He felt a trickle of sweat run down his back. In uniform, he never let the sweat show. He could stand in sweltering equatorial heat, and the sweat would be contained in his T-shirt, roll down his back, down his leg, and pool into his shoes. He was confident in the knowledge that it would never stain his armpits.

But Patterson wasn't wearing the uniform he'd proudly worn for twenty years. He wore a summer-weight Brooks Brothers suit, highly recommended by his boss. Washington was a Brooks Brothers kind of town: not too fancy, not too cheap, not too fashionable, crisp and good-looking. But would it show sweat? He had no idea. He found a reflecting window on the next block, slipped his jacket back on, and checked his reflection.

As he looked for signs of perspiration, he fumed about the situation Pia Sabel had created. A Colonel was dead, an entire village was on a rampage, and Sri Lanka's Mullaitivu district was in upheaval—all thanks to her. Diplomatic outrage had been heaped on the American embassy in Kotte. The outrage bubbled back to Washington, to the Under Secretary. Then it landed on his desk.

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He wasn't afraid of her.

Today she would answer to Donald F. Patterson.

Satisfied with his appearance, he turned and resumed his march.

Then he saw them: Sabel security agents. They were indeed professionals. Two assets were deployed for maximum coverage: one covering the southern approach, the other on the north. Right in the middle sat Pia Sabel—staring him down.

He maintained eye contact while assessing the others in his peripheral vision. The multiracial woman had spotted him first. She recalibrated her position, separating from her boss and her counterpart, making any attempt to shoot them exponentially more difficult. Not that he planned to shoot anyone. Her move was not a reaction to any threat he might pose. It was movement by instinct.

From his research, he knew the woman's name: Tania Cooper, a decorated veteran sniper with two Purple Hearts, courtesy of the Taliban before going to college and returning as a fast-track officer. Her service record had only one blemish, a sealed court martial that resulted in a demotion from captain to warrant officer. She left the Rangers days later and joined Sabel Security. Intelligence placed her in Sri Lanka at the time of last week's incident. The other agent was harder to identify. He was average build and average height, had a tight haircut, and was white with no distinguishing features. Most likely Agent Marty Browning, chief of personal security for Pia Sabel. Neither of them was a threat to Patterson. He had nothing to fear from bodyguards. There would be no violence. She must have brought a show of force just to intimidate him. But it wouldn't work.

Pia Sabel was a lot taller than he'd imagined. He knew she was a world-class athlete and knew she cross-trained and worked out like a fanatic, but that hadn't prepared him for seeing her in person. She had an extraordinary presence. She wasn't beautiful like Miss America, but a type of beauty emanated from her. Her countenance rippled with tension, as if a tremendous potential energy lay hidden just beneath the surface.

Like a tiger.

What struck Patterson most was the intensity in her eyes. Gray-green, they focused on him with unrelenting precision. She was measuring him,

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taking in the way he marched, the way he swung his arms, the way he shifted his weight with each step. She was calculating the length of his stride, the balance of his heel, the amount of bend in his knee.

Like a tiger.

Patterson took a deep breath and steeled himself. He twisted his neck, working out any kinks. Everything was going to be fine. He had decades of military experience, years of command, years of success. She was nothing more than an orphan fortunate enough to have been adopted by a grad student who became a billionaire. Anyone could succeed with that kind of luck.

She wore a snug, gray Under Armour tank top and tight yoga pants with running shoes. That surprised him. He'd expected a business suit—something more professional, something that indicated she was the owner of Sabel Security, not some kid on her way to the gym, even if her father had given her the company for a birthday present.

Patterson lifted his chin and marched straight toward her. He had a job to do. He'd planned his conversation from start to finish. He'd practiced it too. He was ready. He rewound the script to the beginning. First, he would establish dominance by placing himself directly in front of her, in her space. He grabbed the wire chair at her table and tugged it.

